

SECRET

65^N
25X1

16 November 1978

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Recent Nicaraguan Election History

In the February 1967 Nicaraguan general election, US Embassy reporting indicated "large scale irregularities and dishonesty." The number of voters registered by the government (836,000) was virtually 100 percent of the conceivably eligible voters. Of this number, 78 percent voted.

Luis Somoza's margin (74 percent overall) was not credible in some departments. Some ballot boxes were stolen, secrecy was frequently violated, Conservative Party observers were ejected from some polls, partisan propaganda was displayed in voting places, and some known opposition voters were intimidated. Most Nicaraguans were apathetic about the election and the fraud, while those opponents who hoped to contest the outcome were either powerless or simply inept.

In the pro forma February 1972 election for representatives to the constituent assembly, and municipalities, government voter registration (971,000) again was 100 percent or more of the potentially eligible voters. The US Embassy estimated that 100,000 to 150,000 of this total were illegal, though not all were due to registration abuse by Somoza's Nationalist Liberal Party (PLN).

The campaign was open and the opposition media was given free rein. Nevertheless, the Conservative Party organization was weak, short of funds, and without its own newspaper.

Seventy-three percent of those registered supposedly voted (709,000), but the figure was probably inflated by 25 percent. The government secretly adjusted the vote

25X1

RP M 78-10431

State Dept. review completed

SECRET

to increase the Conservative share to 25 percent for the seats in the constituent assembly. An effort to change the municipal vote in order to give the Conservatives a few mayoralties aborted when it was exposed by the opposition newspaper La Prensa.

The September 1974 general election campaign was initially inhibited by martial law restrictions on public gatherings in Managua, but by July this was lifted. The media was once closed down for 11 days in April, but was otherwise unfettered. Once again the Conservative Party was hurt by the lack of a party newspaper, but it was further hobbled by a colorless, uninspiring, straw man candidate (Edmundo Paguaga) who refused to attack Somoza openly. He stopped using one campaign slogan--"Paguaga is a good family man"--for fear of antagonizing Somoza by suggesting that he was not a good family man.

The National Guard departmental commanders were instructed to work closely with civil administrators and mayors (PLN) in grass roots politicking. By helping with soil surveys and other agricultural advice, the Guard played on its reasonably close relationship with the campesinos to help turn out the rural vote.

The campaign was peaceful, but plagued by apathy and cynicism. When La Prensa and 27 opposition leaders launched an abstention campaign, it quickly became the most significant issue. Paguaga stood to suffer most from abstention, and he campaigned primarily against this, rather than against Somoza. The opposition leaders challenged Somoza's constitutional eligibility and warned that he would not permit a free election. The government prosecuted the leaders of the abstention campaign, and shortly before the election, suspended their constitutional rights.

The 1971 Kupia Kumi pact which restructured the government and established the terms for the 1974 election, had stipulated that there would be 200 Organization of American States (OAS) election observers. Somoza and Paguaga changed this and invited instead 13 private observers from around the hemisphere, but with no OAS connection.

The voter turnout was light, due as much to apathy as to the abstention campaign. To correct this and to handle numerous charges and counter-charges of fraud, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal required an unprecedented month-long delay before releasing the results. Somoza received 92 percent (734,000) of the vote, while Paguaga garnered 8 percent (66,000). Though there is no firm evidence, the totals for registration and turnout were probably artificially inflated as in past elections.

There were much fewer reports in the 1974 election of the kinds of blatant abuse used in the past. In this election, however, PLN representatives sat at every voting table to give party ID cards to those who voted for the PLN, often confirming the vote by violating the secrecy of ballots. These ID cards were necessary for government employees to retain their jobs or for other citizens to request services from local PLN government and political officials.

In the February 1978 municipal election, turnout was again small, due to apathy and to the disruptive atmosphere following the assassination of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro and the resulting national strike. In this election, 200,000 more voters were registered than were eligible, and when this was exposed in La Prensa, the government was unable to explain it. The PLN won its accustomed majorities, but we do not have precise figures.

I

STAT

1 Herap - SRP - 14 June 79